If I Had You

—"But if I had you

That would be the only thing I'd ever need."

March 7th. Morning. 9:47 AM.

Est was making coffee when his phone rang, The espresso machine was hissing, the sound that had become part of his routine. The phone rang again. He looked at the screen. The number made his chest tight.

Milo.

Est stared at it for three long rings. His finger hovered over the decline button—the red circle that would send the call into voicemail, that would buy him more time, that would allow him to continue avoiding the conversation he'd been avoiding for weeks.

But something stopped him.

Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was the fact that he'd been avoiding this call for weeks and the avoidance was starting to cost more energy than the actual conversation would. Maybe it was because he knew—deep down, that running away from hard conversations never actually made them go away. It just delayed them. Postponed them. Made them worse.

He answered.

"Don't hang up." Milo said immediately.

"I wasn't going to," Est replied. His voice came out quieter than he meant it to.

There was a pause.

"Good," Milo said finally. "Because we need to talk."

Est pressed the phone between his ear and his shoulder, pouring hot water into his espresso cup with shaking hands. "I know."

"Do you?" Milo's voice wasn't angry. It was just... tired. "Because you've been ghosting me for weeks, Est. Ever since the clip went viral. I've been texting you. Calling you. Leaving voice messages. And you just—disappeared."

Est set the espresso cup down. His hands were shaking too much to hold it steady. He sat on the kitchen counter, his bare feet dangling, his head leaning back against the cabinet. The cool wood pressed against his skull.

"I didn't know what to say." Est said quietly.

"You could have said anything. You could have said 'I'm okay' or 'I'm not okay' or 'leave me alone.' But you didn't say anything at all. And that hurt more than you think." Milo said.

Est closed his eyes. "I'm sorry." Est said. The words felt inadequate. Small. Like trying to fill a canyon with a teaspoon.

"I don't want an apology," Milo said. "I want to understand. What happened, Est? Why did you cut me off?"

There was a pause. Confusion in the silence.

"Because I felt guilty," Est said. His voice was barely above a whisper now. "About you defending me. About you fighting Kai on a live stream in front of a million people. About you risking your career to tell the truth when I was too much of a coward to do it myself. You put yourself on the line for me, Milo. And I didn't ask you to do that. I didn't deserve that."

Milo was quiet for a moment. Then he laughed—a short, surprised sound that held no humor, just disbelief. "Est. You think I regret that?"

"Don't you?"

"No. Not even a little bit."

Est blinked. Opened his eyes. Stared at the white ceiling of his apartment. "But you lost followers. You got hate comments. People called you—"

"People called me a lot of things," Milo interrupted. His voice was firmer now. More certain. "They called me a clout chaser. They called me a troublemaker. They called me bitter and jealous and a dozen other things that I'm not going to repeat because they don't matter. And you know why they don't matter? Because I was telling the truth. And the truth matters more than my follower count. More than my brand deals. More than anything the internet thinks about me."

Est didn't know what to say.

"I spoke out of turn," Milo continued. His voice was calmer now. More thoughtful. "I was upset. I was watching Kai sit there on that live stream, playing the victim, acting like he was the one who got hurt. Like he was the one who deserved sympathy. When he was the one who ruined your relationship. He threw away three years to sleep with someone else. He cheated on you with his manager in a hotel room while you were working. And then he had the audacity to act like you were the cold one. Like you didn't care. Like you were the problem."

"And everyone was acting like that was the truth," Milo continued. "Like you were this emotionless robot who couldn't love anyone. Like you abandoned him. Like you were the villain. And I just—I couldn't listen to it anymore. I couldn't sit there and let

Kai rewrite history. So I said something. I interrupted him. I told people what actually happened. And yeah, it got messy. Yeah, it went viral. Yeah, people got mad. But I don't regret it, Est. I don't regret telling the truth."

Est felt something in his chest. Like a knot that had been tied too tight was finally starting to come undone. "You shouldn't have had to fight my battles for me." Est said quietly.

"Maybe not," Milo agreed. "But I wanted to. Because watching you learn to be visible helped me learn to be visible too."

The words hit Est like a wave. He closed his eyes, letting them sink in.

"What do you mean?" Est asked.

"I mean—" Milo paused. Took a breath. "I mean that when you left New York, when you packed up your life and moved back to Thailand without explaining anything to anyone, I was angry at first. I thought you were running away. I thought you were being a coward. But then I realized—you weren't running away. You were choosing yourself. You were deciding that your mental health, your happiness, your life mattered more than what the industry wanted from you. And that was the bravest thing I'd ever seen."

Est's throat felt tight. His eyes were stinging.

"And it made me think," Milo continued. "About all the times I stayed silent when I should have spoken up. About all the times I let people treat me like a product instead of a person. About all the times I performed happiness when I was miserable inside. Watching you stop performing—watching you choose honesty over image—it gave me permission to do the same. So when Kai started lying about you, I couldn't stay quiet. Because staying quiet would have been going back to the old way. The way where we protect the industry instead of protecting each other."

Est couldn't speak. The words were there—thank you, I'm sorry, I didn't know, you're braver than I am—but they were stuck in his throat, trapped behind the tightness, behind the emotion he'd been holding back for weeks.

"I should have kept quiet and ignored him," Milo said. His voice was softer now. Almost apologetic. "I'm sorry, Est. I made everything bigger. I made it harder for you. The clip going viral, the internet picking it apart, the think pieces, the hot takes—that's all my fault. I should have just let it go. I should have—"

"No," Est said firmly. The word came out stronger than he expected. "No, Milo. You didn't make it harder. You made it real. You made people see what actually happened. And I should have done that myself a long time ago."

"Why didn't you?" Milo asked. Not accusatory. Just curious. Genuinely trying to

understand.

"Because I was scared," Est admitted. "I thought if I stayed silent, it would go away. I thought if I just ignored it, people would forget. But they didn't forget. They just filled in the blanks with their own stories. And those stories made me the villain. They made me the cold, unfeeling model who broke Kai's heart. And I let them. I let people believe that because speaking up felt harder than staying silent."

"You're not the villain, Est."

"I know that now. But for a long time, I believed I was."

"The change of scenery was good for you," Milo said. "I can hear it in your voice. You sound... different. Lighter."

"I feel different," Est admitted. "I have people here. Real people. Not industry people. Not transactional people. Just... friends."

"I'm happy for you," Milo said. And he sounded like he meant it. "Kai is a fool who's not worth your time. I gave him what he wanted—attention, drama, a viral moment—but I won't do it again. I'll learn from my mistake. Next time someone tries to rewrite history, I'll be smarter about how I fight back."

"You don't have to fight back at all," Est said. "That's my job. My story. My responsibility."

"True," Milo agreed. "But if you need backup, I'm here. Just—maybe text me first next time. So we can coordinate. So I don't accidentally make things worse by going rogue on a live stream."

Est laughed.

"Deal." Est said.

When they finally hung up, Est sat on the kitchen counter for a long time, staring at his phone. The espresso he'd made had gone cold. The apartment was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of traffic outside. Est smiled. Set his phone down. Picked up his cold espresso and drank it anyway.

It tasted terrible. But somehow, that was okay.

11:47 PM.

William was sitting in his small apartment, surrounded by editing equipment and half-finished photography projects. His laptop was open to a folder he'd been avoiding for weeks—the folder labeled "Saturday Night." The folder full of photos of Est.

He hadn't opened it in days. He'd been trying to move on. Trying to forget. Trying to convince himself that the night he'd spent with Est didn't matter anymore. That it was just a one-time thing. A moment. A memory that would fade if he just stopped feeding it. But the folder was still there. Still labeled. Still waiting.

His phone buzzed.

Lego: Do you want to do something just the two of us?

William stared at the text message for a full thirty seconds. Lego always seemed to know. Always seemed to arrive at exactly the right moment. Like he could read minds just by looking at people. Or maybe—more likely—Lego just paid attention. Noticed when people were quiet for too long. Noticed when the usual patterns shifted. Noticed when someone needed to be pulled out of their own head before they drowned in it.

William typed back.

William: Sure. When?

Lego: Today! I'll pick you up at 2 PM. Wear something comfortable. We're going to have FUN.

William smiled despite himself. Lego's energy was impossible to resist. Even through text, even when William's brain was a mess, Lego's brightness cut through like sunlight through fog.

William: Okay. See you soon.

He closed the laptop. Pushed the folder—and everything it represented—out of his mind.

At least for today.

The café smelled like baked pastries and fresh fruit. Sunlight poured through the big windows, making everything look warm and golden. The walls were painted soft cream. The furniture was a mix of vintage wood and modern metal. Potted plants hung from the ceiling, their leaves casting gentle shadows across the tables.

It was the kind of place that felt designed for Instagram photos. But somehow, it still felt cozy.

Lego was already sitting at a corner table when William arrived.

He looked effortlessly stylish—wearing a gray sweater with a wide sailor collar that showed off his collarbones, simple black shorts that hit just above the knee, neat white socks pulled up to mid-calf, and polished black shoes that clicked softly when

he moved. A thin headband held back his loose, semi-curled hair, keeping it out of his face. His favorite black bag sat on the seat beside him, and hanging from the strap was a little brown bunny keychain wearing a tiny ribbon on its ears. The bunny swayed gently every time Lego shifted.

He looked like a burst of fresh energy. Like someone who had decided to be happy today and was committing to it fully.

Completely hiding the fact that his heart was a little bruised over Tui.

"Liam!" Lego waved enthusiastically the moment William walked through the door.

William approached the table, and Lego immediately bumped his shoulder against William's as he sat down. The contact was brief, warm, the casual physical affection that was Lego's default language.

"Thanks for coming out with me today," Lego said, his smile bright and genuine. "My apartment was getting too quiet."

Too quiet because I keep wishing Tui was there, Lego thought. Too quiet because I keep imagining what it would be like if he was sitting on my sofa, or making terrible jokes in my kitchen, or just—existing in my space. But He can't say that out loud. Not yet.

William looked down at his hands, then at Lego. "Thanks for dragging me out. My head was getting too loud."

Lego reached across the table and slid a tall glass of iced tea toward William. The ice clinked softly against the glass. Condensation was already forming on the outside, making the glass slippery and cold.

"Well, leave it all outside," Lego said with a dramatic wave of his hand. "Today is a strictly 'no-thinking' zone. I ordered us the sweetest things on the menu for a reason. Sugar fixes everything. That's science."

William caught the glass, his fingers wrapping around the cold surface. He forced a smile, checking his reflection in the window to make sure he looked normal. To make sure the mess inside his head wasn't visible on his face.

In reality, his mind was spinning. He couldn't stop thinking about the night he spent with Est. The memory kept replaying in his head like a song he couldn't turn off. The way Est had looked at him—really looked at him, like William was someone worth seeing. The way Est's voice had sounded when he asked if everything was alright. The way the morning light had filtered through the curtains and made Est's sleeping face look peaceful, soft, unguarded.

And then the way William had left. Without waking him. Without saying goodbye. Without leaving a note. Just—gone.

He was terrified of what it meant. He wished he could just hit a delete button on his memory.

"I'm fine," William said, taking a quick sip of the iced tea. "Just had a lot on my mind."

Lego was already biting into a strawberry croissant. The pastry was flaky, golden, dusted with powdered sugar. When he bit down, a bit of cream squeezed out and landed on the tip of his nose.

Lego didn't notice. He just kept eating, his eyes closing in obvious enjoyment.

"Well, today we're not thinking about anything," Lego said through a mouthful of croissant. "Deal?"

William laughed—a real laugh. The tight knot in his chest loosened just a tiny bit. He reached over with a napkin and pointed to his own nose. "You've got a little something... right there."

Lego's eyes went wide. He grabbed the napkin and wiped his nose, laughing at himself. "See? This is why I need you. You keep me from walking around looking ridiculous."

"You never look ridiculous," William said quietly.

"I absolutely do," Lego corrected. "But that's part of my charm. I've decided that looking perfect all the time is boring. I'd rather look alive."

William smiled. A real, soft smile. "You definitely look alive."

They ate their pastries slowly. Lego talked—about a new nail design he wanted to try, about a vintage clothing store he'd found online, about how his sister had sent him another care package from Paris and he was running out of places to put all the fancy skincare products. William listened. Really listened. Not just hearing the words, but absorbing them. Letting Lego's brightness fill the space where his own anxiety usually lived. For the first time in days, he felt like he could breathe.

"Okay," Lego announced, finishing the last bite of his croissant and dusting the powdered sugar off his hands. "Next stop: the arcade. I have a very important mission, and I need your help."

"What's the mission?" William asked, amused.

"Winning matching keychains for our bags," Lego said seriously. "If we don't get matching ones, this whole day doesn't count. Those are the rules."

"Whose rules?"

"My rules. Which are the only rules that matter when I'm planning the day."

William laughed again. "Alright. Let's go win some keychains."

A massive, neon-lit arcade in Siam Square.

The air was alive with electronic music, flashing lights, and ringing bells. Machines beeped and chimed in a chaotic symphony. Kids ran past, clutching tickets. Teenagers huddled around racing games, shouting at the screens. A group of college students was taking turns at a dance machine, laughing as they failed the complicated steps.

It was loud. Chaotic. Overwhelming in the best possible way.

William couldn't help but smile. For the past twenty-four hours, his brain had been a chaotic mess. The fear that he'd ruined something before it even started. The guilt of leaving. The certainty that Est would never forgive him if he found out. But here, in this bright, noisy arcade with Lego bouncing around like a human sparkler, William felt lighter.

"Look!" Lego marched straight toward a specialized mini-claw machine near the back wall.

The machine was smaller than the regular ones. Inside the glass case were dozens of tiny, beautifully made charms: animals wearing clothes, food with faces, tiny versions of famous characters.

"William, we need to win matching ones. If we don't, this hang-out doesn't count. Those are the official rules." Lego pressed his face against the glass, his breath fogging it up.

"You just made up those rules." William pointed out.

"Rules I make up are still rules," Lego said seriously. "Now buy tokens. We have work to do."

William bought a small cup of tokens from the change machine, glad to have a physical task to focus on. Something concrete. Something that required hand-eye coordination instead of emotional processing.

"Alright," he said, handing Lego a token. "Let's see what you've got."

Lego dropped the token into the slot with the confidence of someone who had done this a thousand times. The machine beeped. The claw lit up. Lego gripped the joystick with intense focus, his tongue poking out slightly between his lips as he concentrated.

He moved the claw carefully over a tiny, round duck keychain. The duck had a

cheerful expression and was wearing a little yellow raincoat. It was objectively adorable.

Lego lined it up. Adjusted. Lined it up again.

Then he pressed the button.

The claw dropped. Wobbled. Closed around the duck's head. Lifted—

And the duck slipped out. The claw came up empty.

Lego let out a dramatic, heartbroken wail, leaning his forehead against the glass. "The machine is rigged! It hates me, William. It knows my soul is fragile today and it's attacking me personally."

"It's a machine," William said, trying not to laugh. "It doesn't have opinions about your soul."

"You don't know that. Maybe it's sentient. Maybe it feeds on disappointment."

"Let me try." William said, stepping up to the machine.

He dropped a token in. The machine beeped again. The claw lit up.

William wasn't thinking about Est right now. He was just measuring the distance between the claw and a specific keychain—a small, sleepy-eyed black cat wearing a tiny artist's beret. The cat had its eyes half-closed and looked perpetually unimpressed with the world. He lined it up carefully. Adjusted for the slight drift he'd noticed when Lego played. Calculated the drop timing.

Then he tapped the button.

The claw dropped. Clamped around the cat. Lifted smoothly. Carried it all the way to the drop chute without wavering.

Thud.

The little cat landed in the prize slot.

"No way!" Lego squealed, actually jumping up and down. He reached into the slot and pulled out the sleepy cat keychain, holding it up by its silver ring like a trophy. "Oh, it's perfect for you! Look at its grumpy little face! It looks exactly like you!"

William took the cat, smiling despite himself. The plushie was soft, well-made, the kind of quality you didn't usually get from arcade machines. The little beret was stitched on carefully. The sleepy expression was embroidered with tiny, precise stitches.

It was perfect for him.

Inspired by the win, he played again. This time, he aimed for a bright yellow, fluffy chick keychain with a tiny sparkling crown on its head. The chick looked cheerful, energetic, and ridiculously cute. Loud, fun, and full of personality.

Just like Lego.

William focused. Lined it up. Dropped the claw.

It caught on the first try.

He pulled the royal chick out of the prize slot and handed it to Lego.

Lego's face lit up like someone had just given him the best present in the world. He immediately clipped the chick right next to the brown bunny on his black bag. The two keychains swayed together, the bunny and the chick hanging side by side.

William followed his lead, clipping the sleepy artist cat onto his own camera bag strap.

Looking down at their new charms, they felt a quiet sense of accomplishment. Like they'd completed a mission that mattered.

"We did it," Lego said solemnly. "The day officially counts now."

"I'm glad," William said, still smiling. "I'd hate for all this fun to be disqualified on a technicality."

They spent another hour in the arcade. Lego tried—and failed—to win at a rhythm game, pressing buttons with wild enthusiasm but zero accuracy. William won a small pile of tickets at a shooting game. They took terrible photos in a photo booth, making ridiculous faces, laughing so hard the machine had to retake one of the shots because they were both blurry.

By the time they left, William's cheeks hurt from smiling. His brain felt quiet. Calm. The photos of Est on his computer felt like something from another lifetime.

The restaurant was warm, filled with the smell of rich broth and roasted garlic. The lighting was soft and golden. The sound of other diners talking and laughing created a comfortable background hum.

They slid into a booth, letting their backpacks sit on the bench next to them. The new keychain plushies peeked out—the sleepy cat and the royal chick, the bunny and all of Lego's accumulated charms creating a small, cheerful collection.

When two steaming bowls of ramen were placed between them, the high-energy chatter finally slowed down. They ate happily. The broth was rich and savory. The noodles were perfectly cooked. The soft-boiled eggs had runny yolks that mixed into

the soup, making it even richer.

Lego rested his chin on his hand, his loose curls falling slightly forward as he looked at the little chick keychain jingling against his bag. His eyes went a little distant for a split second, and William could see the shift—the moment when Lego's brightness dimmed just a fraction, when the thing he was trying not to think about crept back in.

He was thinking about Tui. William could tell.

But then Lego looked across the table at William, who was quietly eating, looking more relaxed than he had all day. And the brightness returned.

Lego reached across the table and lightly tapped the top of William's hand. "Hey. Today was really fun."

William looked up, his eyes soft. He realized that for the last few hours, he hadn't thought about the panic of the night with Est even once. The heavy weight in his mind had been replaced by the sound of arcade games and Lego's bright laughter.

He smiled—a real, relaxed smile. "Yeah. It really was. Thanks for dragging me out, Lego."

"Anytime, Liam," Lego said, his bubbly energy returning full force as he pointed his chopsticks at William's bowl. "Now hurry up and finish your noodles, because we still have to walk back, and our keychains need to show off their new home!"

William laughed. But then Lego's expression shifted. His usual brightness faded into something softer. More vulnerable. The mask dropping just enough to show the person underneath.

"Can I tell you something?" Lego asked quietly.

William set his chopsticks down immediately, his attention entirely on his friend. "Of course."

Lego swallowed hard. His fingers played with the edge of his napkin, folding and unfolding it in a nervous pattern.

"I think I'm in love with P'Tui," Lego said. The words came out in a rush, like he had to say them quickly before he lost the courage. "But I'm terrified. Because I don't know if he could love me back. Not because I'm not enough—I know I'm enough—but because I'm a boy. And I don't know if that's something he wants. I don't know if I'm something he wants."

William listened intently. He didn't try to fix the problem or offer easy solutions. He knew—from his own experience, from his own fears—that emotional pain couldn't just be fixed with a quick tip. Sometimes the only thing you could do was sit with

someone while they felt it. Hold space for the hurt without trying to make it disappear.

"That sounds really hard." William said quietly.

"It is," Lego admitted. A small, sad smile touched his lips. "But I think I have to tell him anyway. Because keeping it inside is worse than knowing the answer. At least if I tell him and he says no, I'll know. I won't spend the rest of my life wondering what if. I won't torture myself imagining scenarios that will never happen. I'll just—know. And then I can move forward."

William thought of his own hidden situation with Est. The terrifying secret he was keeping locked away. The night he couldn't forget and couldn't talk about.

He looked at Lego, amazed by his friend's bravery.

"Even if the answer is no?" William asked.

"Even then," Lego said firmly. "At least I'll have been honest. At least I'll know I tried. At least I won't be stuck in this weird limbo where I'm in love with someone who doesn't know I exist in that way."

"He knows you exist," William said gently. "P'Tui knows exactly who you are. He pays attention to you. He shows up for you. That's not nothing."

"I know," Lego said. "But paying attention and being in love are different things. And I need to know which one it is. I need to know if there's a chance, or if I'm just—" He paused. Took a breath. "—if I'm just setting myself up for heartbreak."

Before the conversation could go any deeper, the loud buzz of Lego's phone broke the heavy silence. Lego glanced at the screen, and a bright, familiar smile immediately popped back onto his face. All the vulnerability from a moment ago tucked away, hidden behind the brightness.

He answered without a single second of hesitation.

"Hey, Hongshi!" Lego chirped loudly, his voice shifting back to the cheerful, energetic register that was his public default.

On the other end, Hong's voice sounded rushed. Tense. Lacking his usual sarcastic calm. He skipped the greetings entirely. "Have either of you talked to Nut today?"

Lego's smile faltered slightly. "On the phone? No. I only sent him a text message to say good morning. Why? Is something wrong?"

"He's not answering any of my calls," Hong said. "His phone keeps going to voicemail. I've tried six times."

William leaned closer to the phone so Hong could hear him. "I haven't seen him

today either. But I saw him yesterday afternoon. We had lunch together at his tattoo studio. He seemed fine then. Normal."

"Okay," Hong said quickly. He sounded distracted, his mind clearly somewhere else. "Thanks, you two."

And then he hung up. Just like that. No goodbye. No explanation. Just—click.

Lego lowered his phone, staring at the blank screen with a puzzled expression. William blinked, the relaxed, peaceful feeling of their afternoon suddenly slipping away, replaced by a vague sense of worry. They looked at each other across the table, entirely confused and wondering what exactly was going on with Nut and Hong.

Earlier that same day.

The quiet halls of the museum were cool and peaceful—a massive contrast to the sticky Bangkok heat outside. The air conditioning was powerful, almost cold. Like stepping into a different dimension where time moved slower and noise wasn't allowed.

Est walked through the glass doors, wearing his usual simple, model-off-duty style: an oversized dark blazer that hung perfectly off his shoulders, a plain white tee underneath, black trousers that were tailored but not tight, and his favorite noise-canceling headphones resting around his neck like a safety blanket he wasn't currently using but wanted nearby just in case.

He was just looking for a quiet space to disappear into. A place where he could think without being perceived. Where he could exist without performing. But as he turned the corner toward the temporary exhibition wing, he spotted a familiar figure standing at the ticket counter.

Nut.

Today, Nut looked different. Much more put together than usual.

Instead of his typical ink-stained apron or casual studio clothes—the soft henleys and joggers that he wore when he was working, when comfort mattered more than appearance—he was wearing a crisp, well-fitted olive button-down shirt with the sleeves neatly rolled up to just below his elbows. The fabric was quality—Est could tell even from a distance. Dark trousers. Clean boots. His hair was combed back, styled with what looked like a small amount of product. Not too much. Just enough to look intentional.

He looked sharp. Mature. Striking in a way that was different from his usual steady, comfortable presence.

Like he'd put effort in. Like this trip to the museum mattered.

Nut turned from the ticket counter, noticed Est, and a warm, steady smile broke across his face.

"Est?" Nut's voice was surprised but pleased. Genuinely happy to see him. "What a surprise. Are you here alone?"

"Yeah," Est said quietly. He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Just looking for some quiet. You?"

"I've been wanting to see the guest exhibition before it closes," Nut said, gesturing to a large banner hanging from the ceiling.

The banner showed a detailed anatomical drawing. Text in both Thai and English announced: HUMAN STRUCTURES: The Art and Science of Anatomy.

"Do you want to go in together?" Nut asked. Not pushing. Just offering. Leaving space for Est to say no if he wanted to be alone.

Est hesitated for a split second. But Nut's presence had always been remarkably steady and safe. He didn't ask invasive questions. He just—existed beside you.

"Sure," Est nodded. "I'll tag along."

Nut's smile widened slightly. He purchased two tickets instead of one.

As they walked into the dimly lit exhibit, Nut's eyes lit up in a way Est had never seen before. The exhibition was housed in a long, narrow gallery. The walls were painted dark gray—almost black. Spotlights illuminated each piece individually, creating pools of light in the darkness. The effect was dramatic.

The pieces themselves were a mix of historical and contemporary anatomical art. Drawings from the Renaissance showing dissected bodies with religious imagery surrounding them. Modern medical illustrations rendered in exquisite detail. Photographs of plastinated bodies—real human bodies preserved through a process that replaced water and fat with polymers, allowing the internal structures to be displayed without decay.

To most people, it would look clinical. Maybe even macabre. Unsettling in the way that death always was when it was made visible, when the thing that was supposed to stay hidden was put on display. But to Nut—it was beautiful.

He moved slowly from frame to frame, deeply fascinated. His eyes tracked the lines of muscles. The curves of bones. The way tendons connected. The architecture of the human form.

Est watched Nut instead of watching the art.

He observed the calm, respectful way Nut moved. How he kept a polite distance—not crowding Est's space, not assuming familiarity, giving him room to exist separately even though they were together. How his voice remained a low, comforting hum when he pointed out details. How his hands stayed in his pockets except when he gestured at something particularly interesting.

Suddenly, a strange, electric thought hit Est's mind.

Could it be him?

Est's heart did a sudden, heavy thud against his ribs.

He was still secretly haunted by the blurry memory of that one night. The phantom touch of a mystery person who had handled his body with absolute reverence and genuine care. Who had asked is everything alright? before continuing. Who had touched his face like it was something precious instead of something to be used. Who had treated him like a person—whole, valuable, worthy of care—rather than a collection of detachable parts.

The memory was fragmentary. Incomplete. Blurred by alcohol and protective amnesia and the specific way his brain had decided to file the experience under too important to lose, too scary to examine. But certain things had stayed sharp: The feeling of safety. The careful hands.

Looking at Nut right now——Est couldn't help but wonder.

Did he sleep with Nut?

Is Nut the secret keeper of that night?

The thought was both thrilling and terrifying. Thrilling because Nut was—good. Safe. Someone Est could actually imagine being with. Someone who wouldn't hurt him. Terrifying because if it was Nut, that meant Nut had been keeping the secret this whole time. Had been watching Est search. Had been choosing, every day, not to say anything.

"The detail here is incredible." Nut said softly, breaking Est out of his spiraling thoughts.

Nut's fingers traced the air just an inch away from the glass, following the line of the muscle without actually touching. His expression was focused. Like he was looking at something sacred.

"The way the muscle wraps around the bone..." Nut continued, his voice quiet, almost meditative. "It takes so much patience to capture that accurately. To understand not just what it looks like, but how it works. How it moves. How it connects to everything else."

Est stepped a little closer. Close enough to see the details Nut was seeing. "You appreciate the structure."

"I appreciate the honesty of it," Nut replied, turning his head to look at Est with those calm, grounded eyes. "The body doesn't lie. It holds everything we try to hide. Every scar tells a story. Every muscle remembers how it's been used. The body keeps the truth even when we try to forget it."

The words hung in the cool air between them, heavy with unspoken meaning. Est stayed perfectly still, his mind racing with questions he was far too guarded to ask out loud.

Do you know what I've been looking for?

Are you the answer I've been searching for, or am I projecting because I want it to be you?

Nut reached into his pocket to check the time, pulling out his phone.

He pressed the power button. The screen stayed completely black. Just a brief flash—the battery icon showing empty. Nut let out a quiet, tired sigh and slipped the dead phone back into his pocket.

A subtle shadow passed over his face. He stared blankly at the exhibition wall, but Est could tell he wasn't seeing the art anymore.

Est noticed the shift immediately. The change in Nut's energy—from calm and present to somewhere else entirely. Somewhere worried. But Est didn't press for answers.

By the time Lego returned to his apartment, the heavy Bangkok sun had melted into a soft, bruised pink across the horizon. The bright, high-energy distraction of the arcade felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

Lego stepped through his front door, the little royal chick keychain jingling quietly against his black bag. But as the door clicked shut behind him, the familiar scent of his apartment felt different.

Wrong.

Sitting on the edge of his sofa was a structured black jacket—one he recognized instantly. Right next to the couch, placed down with a rare lack of neatness, were Hong's shoes.

Lego's heart dropped into his stomach.

The strange, hurried phone call from earlier suddenly flashed through his mind.

Lego dropped his bag on the entryway table and walked quickly toward his bedroom.

When he pushed the door open, the room was dimly lit by the fading pink light bleeding through the windows. The blackout curtains were still open. The last rays of sunset were painting everything in soft, dusky colors.

Hong was there.

He was lying on Lego's bed. Curled up. Small in a way Hong never allowed himself to be in public. He was wearing an oversized gray sweater—one of Lego's, pulled from the closet, smelling like Lego's laundry detergent and chamomile room spray and a pair of plaid pajama pants that Lego recognized as his own. Hong's gray hair was messy.

Lego didn't hesitate. He walked over to the side of the bed and quietly lay down right next to Hong, letting the soft mattress sink under his weight.

As Lego got closer, he noticed something.

The clean, sweet scent of chamomile that usually filled Lego's room was completely overwhelmed. There was a heavy, faint scent of cigarettes clinging to Hong's clothes. And underneath that, something else. Sweet. Earthy. The distinct smell of marijuana.

Lego looked at Hong's face, and his chest tightened.

Hong's usually sharp, dark eyes were bloodshot. Rimmed with an angry, painful red. His eyeliner was smudged.

For a second, neither of them spoke.

The silence was heavy. Full of things that hadn't been said yet.

Then Hong turned his head slightly to look at Lego. The guarded, sarcastic "Rebel" persona was completely gone. Stripped away. Leaving behind something raw and shattered and vulnerable in a way that Hong never let himself be.

Right before Lego's eyes, a single, silent tear slipped from one of Hong's slanted eyes. It traced a wet path down his pale cheek, catching the fading sunset light, turning pink-gold for a moment before it disappeared into the fabric of the pillow.

"Hongshi," Lego whispered. His voice was soft. Worried. Full of care. "What happened?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Lego reached out and wrapped his arms tightly around Hong, pulling him close into the safe, unconditional warmth of his space. His chin rested on top of Hong's head. His hand found the back of Hong's neck.

Hong didn't pull away.

Instead, he buried his face into Lego's shoulder, his arms locking around Lego's waist, hugging him back with a desperate, heavy tightness. Like if he let go, he'd drown.

They stayed like that for a long time.

Lego didn't ask questions. Didn't demand explanations. Didn't try to fix anything.

He just held Hong. Let Hong cry into his shoulder. Let the tears soak through the gray sweater. Finally, Hong pulled back slightly. He let out a shaky breath, sniffing as a small, watery laugh broke through his tears. He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of Lego's sweater, his gaze turning soft and a little glittering as he pointed toward the bedside table.

Sitting right there, next to Hong's own phone and the glowing Lego brick nightlight that Lego kept because it made him smile, were two printed tickets.

Lego leaned over to look closer.

They were entry passes for the human anatomy exhibition at the contemporary museum. The exact one Nut had been talking about for weeks. The one Nut had been planning to visit. The one that was closing soon.

Understanding crashed over Lego like a wave.

"Everything goes wrong for me," Hong said. His voice was thick. "I actually took a risk today. I wanted to surprise Nut. So I bought those tickets. I got dressed. I went all the way to his apartment to pick him up. I was going to just—show up. Be spontaneous. Do the thing people in movies do where they surprise someone they care about and it's romantic and perfect."

He laughed—a bitter, self-deprecating sound.

"But when I got there, he wasn't home. I knocked. I waited. I called him—six times, Lego. Six. And every single call went to voicemail. His phone was completely dead. So I just—stood there. Outside his door. Holding these stupid tickets. Feeling like the biggest idiot in Bangkok."

A grateful smile finally touched his lips.

"I felt so stupid standing outside his door," Hong said quietly. "So I just... came here. I knew you wouldn't mind."

The confusion from the earlier phone call suddenly made perfect sense.

Hong hadn't been acting strange because of some big crisis. He was just dealing with the crushing disappointment of a surprise gone wrong. Hiding out in the one

place he knew he was always safe.

"Of course I don't mind, Hongshi," Lego said softly. He picked up one of the tickets, examining it. The exhibition name. The date. The time slot Hong had chosen—2:00 PM, right in the middle of the afternoon, the perfect time for a spontaneous museum date.

Lego set the ticket back down and shifted closer, sliding his arm around Hong's shoulders again. "You can always come here," Lego said. "This is your safe place too. You don't need permission. You don't need a reason."

He squeezed Hong's shoulder gently.

"But you're wrong, you know. Everything doesn't go wrong for you. Nut didn't stand you up on purpose. His phone is just broken or out of battery. You know how he is with tech. He probably didn't even realize it was dead until it was too late. This wasn't the universe punishing you. This was just—bad timing. Bad luck."

Hong rested his head against Lego's shoulder, letting out a long, exhausted sigh that smelled faintly of tobacco and weed and sadness.

"Yeah," Hong said quietly. "I know. Logically, I know. But it felt like a sign, I guess. The one time I try to do something nice and spontaneous and—and vulnerable—the universe shuts it down. Like I'm not allowed to have soft things. Like soft things aren't meant for people like me."

"That's bullshit," Lego said firmly. Gently. "Soft things are for everyone. You're allowed to want them. You're allowed to try for them. And you're allowed to fail sometimes without it meaning you're cursed or broken or not worthy of good things."

Hong was quiet for a moment. Then: "When did you get so wise?"

"I've always been wise," Lego said. "You just don't listen to me because you're too busy being sarcastic and emotionally unavailable."

Hong laughed—a real laugh this time. Small, but real.

"Besides," Lego continued, "those tickets are valid all weekend. You'll just have to surprise him tomorrow instead. And tonight, since you're already in my clothes and crying on my bed, you're stuck having a movie night with me."

Hong chuckled, the heavy tension finally leaving his shoulders as he closed his eyes.

He felt incredibly lucky—impossibly, unfairly lucky—to have a friend who could turn his worst days into a safe harbor. Who could hold him while he fell apart and then gently, patiently, help him put himself back together.

"Thank you," Hong whispered.

"For what?"

"For being you. For letting me be me. For not making me explain or perform or pretend I'm okay when I'm not."

Lego pressed a kiss to the top of Hong's head—brief, platonic.

"That's what I'm here for," Lego said simply. "Now. Movie. Popcorn. And you're not allowed to pick something depressing. We're watching something with explosions or puppies. Those are your options."

"Can I pick both?"

"If you can find a movie with exploding puppies, I'll allow it."

Hong smiled. Closed his eyes. Let himself be held.